

“Time and the Purposes of God”

Ecclesiastes 3

Time is something we have very little control of. Here in Ecclesiastes 3 Solomon wrote a poem about the positive and negative things that happen to us in life that we have little control over. The poem is not telling us what to do but Rather telling us what happens to all of us over the course of our lives. Solomon writes 14 opposing pairs of circumstances that happen to us during the time of our life that we have no control over. It is intentionally written from one extreme to the other which would also include everything that happens in between.

The point Solomon makes in this poem is that we have little control over the events in our lives, but that God is in control of our lives and somehow is accomplishing His purposes in us through them.

God does have a purpose for your life. If you think life is just one random thing happening after another then you are wrong. Because if that were true, our life would have no meaning. And this is what Solomon is trying to discover in Ecclesiastes, the meaning of life. You won't find it if you look only 'under the sun' [from a godless, this-world-is-all-there-is-perspective], but you will come to believe that God uses our experiences in life to help us become more like His Son Jesus so that we will glorify Him in them.

In ch.'s 1-2 Solomon spoke about his personal experiences in seeking to find purpose under the sun – without God. In Ch. 3-5 he focuses more on observations he has made during his lifetime, the main conclusion of which he will state at the end of ch. 5 – which is the same conclusion he already drew in 2:24-26. He mentions this briefly as well in Ch. 3.

Ch. 3:1-8 is usually the one passage people are familiar with from Ecclesiastes. Solomon is describing for us in poetic contrasting fashion that at different times in our life these things happen to us or we'll be doing things that we have little control over. So we're told that ...

God is Sovereign and Controls Life's Circumstances **(3:1-8)**

This first one in v.2 is obvious of course. We have no control over our births and our deaths. God determines the timing of our birth and our death. He determines whether it's planting time or reaping time. Don't we determine that? No, the weather plays a major factor in that and who's in control of the weather. God.

Solomon observes that we go through a lot of stuff in life. And it seems crazy at times. Some people sadly are killed, while others are healed. Sometimes we're building a new house or on to our house, other times in our life we find ourselves tearing down – downsizing. When your family is growing you need to make more room. Later in life when they've moved out you don't need the room. At times we're weeping and mourning because sorrow has come into our lives. At other times we're laughing and dancing because times are good. Are we in control of the good times and bad? No, God is.

V. 5 is talking about relationships. Sometimes we're embracing each other; at times we're refraining because a relationship is strained. Israel's fields were full of stones. A sign that you disliked your neighbour was that you threw stones in his field. If you were his friend you helped clear his field of stones. We do not have control over people's emotions and feelings. Relationships come and go.

V.6 speaks about material possessions. Sometimes we're looking for things and keeping them, other times we lose them. Our losing them often is due to circumstances out of our control. Lightning strikes our house, too much rain floods our basement, power outage or a water pipe freezes. A strong wind knocks a branch on our house. Ice on the road causes us to damage our car. When these things happen we're reminded that we're not in control over our possessions. One day we have them, the next we might lose them.

V.7 speaks of mourning. When someone died Jews tore their cloaks. Mourning was often accompanied by silence. Job's friends sat with him in silence for 7 days after his family died. What do you say to people when loved ones die? Often very little.

But later on you mend your clothes and talk again as you get on with life. At times there is war and hatred and at times there is peace and love. We have very little control over these things. These are divine times, divine appointments. *"for from Him and through him and to him are all things. To Him be the glory."* [Rom. 11:36]. And as Job said to his wife after all the calamities that fell on him,

"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10)

After Solomon makes this observation that much of the events that happen to us in life are out of our control, he asks

⁹What does the worker gain from his toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on men. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. ¹³That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.

¹⁵ Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

Since God is in control then what should be our response? Is there any benefit to all that we do? Solomon recognizes that yes, since we know God is in control ...

We Must Thank Him and Revere Him **(3:9-15)**

When people experience trials and disappointments they often ask, 'Why is this happening to me?' When people ask 'Why?' they're essentially affirming there is an unseeable force/person which is causing this to happen. *"He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done"*.

This is part of what eternity in our hearts means. God has made us with the internal mechanism that looks for purpose and meaning outside ourselves. How often haven't we heard from the lips of unbelievers that when something unexplainable happens or a coincidence, they say that 'someone was looking out for them' or 'there must be a reason for this'.

We can't always fathom what God is doing, but we can know this God personally and thank Him that our life has purpose and a good and gracious God is in control. Rom. 11:36 says *"For from Him and through him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory."* Let's begin with thanksgiving because

He's given us time (3:9-11)

"God makes everything beautiful in its time." For every activity that happens under heaven is 'beautiful' to God. It's appropriate. It has purpose. Including you. He formed you in your mother's womb. He breathed life in you. He gave you time. He's numbered your days. He didn't have to do that. Thank Him that you have breath and time and that He's opened Your mind to the gospel.

'Eternity in our hearts' means we've been made for eternity, which is why we seek for purpose. That's why Solomon could not find satisfaction under the sun, until he understood life is a gift from God.

Why else should we thank Him and revere Him?

That joy and serving others are gifts from God (3:12-13)

"I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God."

This is Solomon's conclusion to finding how to enjoy life "under the sun". Know that everything you have under the sun comes from the One above the sun. God means for us to enjoy His gifts of family, friends, church, work, possessions and to benefit others with your life which is God's good. This is Solomon's way of saying live for the glory of God. Ask each day: Lord how can I glorify You today in my job, family, community, in my activities, hobbies, interests, etc. This is the best way to enjoy life because the best life is under the sun is to know God, to know we are God's and to know we have a purpose here when we believe in Him and live for Him.

And though we don't fathom all that God is doing, we still thank God because

An eternal life never ends (3:14-15)

"I know that everything God does endures forever: nothing can be added to it, nothing can be taken away from it. God does it so that men will revere Him."

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7). To fear God means to know how awesome He is, to worship Him and humble ourselves before Him for everything He does is for his glory and our eternal joy. Everything that happens under heaven has divine purpose. Thank Him for it and worship Him because He's in control. God brings the past to account. In other words, God brings everything about and will be made clear one day.

Solomon seems to change subjects in vv.16-22. He makes some more observations of life 'under the sun' where he saw that wickedness seems to escape judgment and where fairness should happen, sometimes injustice does. But he also noted in v.17 that judgment will eventually come to every evil activity and deed. These are things we may not understand now – because we live in a sin-filled world – but I think this is still connected to what he's been saying.

***Since God is sovereign and controls life's circumstances
We must respond with thanksgiving and reverence***

So That We Don't Have to Fear the Injustices Man Causes **(3:16-22)**

Which is something from God we can't fathom. Solomon is not naïve. Just because he believes God controls the times and seasons in our lives, and that we are wired to find purpose and joy in Him, it doesn't mean we understand everything that happens under the sun. A lot of bad stuff still happens because there is a lot of bad people who don't know God, and God in His grace and mercy has patiently given them the gift of time also, but they have not found joy in God yet. He wants them to. He wants us to show them and tell them who God is and how we can find eternal life through his Son Jesus. So when we experience injustice or witness it in our world, we don't have to fear these unjust people since

God will judge all injustices (vv.16-17)

¹⁷ I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."

If God does not deal completely with the injustices that happen to us until the final judgment, then we must entrust ourselves to Him who judges justly as Jesus did (1 Pet. 2:23). We are commanded not to retaliate or seek revenge when mistreated, but to trust God with His timing and way to deal with it. He said He will (Rom. 12:17-21). Trust is the fruit of patient waiting on God.

What is one of life's most 'under-the-sun' injustices? Death. But that's how and when God deals with the injustices of life:

Death is the ultimate equalizer (vv.18-20)

¹⁸ I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹ Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return."

What happens to us when we die? From an under the sun/horizontal only/God out of the picture perspective, we might think that animals and humans are the same. Be careful we don't misquote and misunderstand Solomon here. He's making an 'under the sun' comment. We know what he believes about those who trust God. In 12:8 he concludes

Remember Him [trust God] before the silver cord is severed . . . [before you die] and the dust returns to the ground the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Those who remember God – who trust Him by faith – return to God when they die. That's the big promise of the gospel – eternal life. Death is the ultimate equalizer for any injustices received because those who only lived for 'under the sun' experiences, who refused to believe God and accept His Son, will not be with God in eternity.

When we lose our believing loved ones it is a test of our faith to trust God completely that their spirit – who they really are – has risen to be with God. This is our hope! We have to trust God completely by His Word that they are indeed where He says they are. Death is one of life's greatest

hardships and yet, a great joy because if we know Christ we are with God. He said it in His Word, that settles it.

Solomon finishes this section with a question and a conclusion:

²¹ *Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"*

²² *So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?*

“Who knows?” Solomon knows the answer because he tells us in Ch. 12, God knows. This is what gives us peace. We don’t live a purposeless life on earth if we know God. So even when God sovereignly orchestrates life events that are unpleasant or that we don’t fathom, we can

Be at peace because God knows all (vv.21-22)

We can have peace knowing that we can find joy in the events and accomplishments of life because God is behind it all. Solomon says God has given us our “lot”. David said similarly in Ps. 16:5,

Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure.

‘Lot’ and ‘cup’ are used as symbols to describe whatever God brings our way. Are you happy or unhappy with your ‘lot’ in life? We cause ourselves unnecessary grief by our own sins and mistakes and can make our lot miserable. But if God sovereignly portions out to us, our spouse, our children, our jobs and talents, our church, our community, our friends, etc., then Solomon says to enjoy it all because this is God’s lot for us. Everyone and everything God brings into your life is His lot for us. Enjoy God in them by thanking God for them and seeking to glorify God through them. That’s his essential message.

Last week I challenged you to make a list of all the good things that God has given you – people, possessions, talents, interests – to thank God for them and glorify God in them. If you haven’t done that I strongly encourage you to do it. And if you are doing it, keep doing it, maybe for all of July or the summer. Because it makes you really helps you see your life more clearly through His eyes. He’s given us far more than we deserve. And everything that He’s given us is good and is meant for us to enjoy and bring Him glory.

God orchestrates the times and events in your life. His plan and timing involve good stuff and hard stuff. Both are our lot and both can be God-glorifying opportunities. Has God orchestrated some difficulties in your life recently? Can you trust God to do His good out of it? Don’t rob yourself of God’s joy by constantly worrying and dwelling on it. Thank God for His blessings in that difficulty. Praise Him because You know [since He’s set eternity in Your heart] that He is doing something purposeful and beautiful through you for His glory and our good. *“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen”*

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